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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and evaluate the operational theories of six early childhood teachers in a child care center and kindergarten in New Zealand. It is suggested that teacher educators have a responsibility to address the significant gaps in some teachers' theoretical accounts of their own practice, and that practice is most effective when teachers are able to make their beliefs explicit. The teachers' beliefs and practices were explored from the viewpoints of the children, the teachers, and the observer. Observation of four target children in each of the settings was followed by a series of interviews with teachers and children. The data were coded and analyzed. Although the teachers appeared to have many common beliefs, there were individual differences, more in what was done than what was said. Provided are a synthesis of the teachers' beliefs, a discussion of the adequacy of their theories, and an overview of implications for teacher education. It is concluded that teachers must be articulate advocates for their work with young children, and that teacher educators best support this process by becoming partners with teachers in dialogue that informs and transforms practice. Appended are 17 references. (GLR)

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Early Childhood Teachers' Theories In Practice: What Do Teachers Believe?

Paper to be presented at the Fifth Early Childhood Convention, Dunedin, New Zealand,
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This paper reports a study conducted during 1988 which involved six teachers in two different early childhood centres.¹ It arose initially from my reflections on several New Zealand studies which reported the activity of early childhood teachers (e.g. Meade, 1985; Smith and Haggerty, 1979) as well as from my own involvement in teacher development. While a brief outline of the methodology is provided, it is my particular intention in this paper to highlight certain findings from this study and to discuss their implications for teacher educators (and in this group I include all of those who support the development of teachers, both preservice and inservice).

The purpose of the study was to describe and evaluate the 'operational theories' of these early childhood teachers. Several assumptions about the nature of educational theory and its relationship to practice underlay the study. In particular educational theory was seen to comprise teachers' beliefs which are manifest in their practice. This view differs from that evident in much of the literature in this area (eg Verma and Peters, 1974) where theory is portrayed as a body of abstracted scientific knowledge (for example, Piagetian theory) which teachers apply to their work. The beliefs informing teachers' practices were understood to relate to many things; for example, how children learn, what is valuable knowledge, what communities expect, what can be managed. Some of these beliefs will be more powerful than others. Some beliefs will be implicit in action rather than the subject of active consciousness.

In the discussion that follows I will suggest that significant gaps exist in the theoretical accounts that some teachers are able to give of their own practice and that teacher educators have a responsibility to address these. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p116) argue that the answer is not to 'teach more theory' but rather to 'improve the practical effectiveness of the theories teachers employ in conceptualising their own activities'. This means engaging with teachers' existing beliefs and the manifestation of these in their daily work. This is not to say that there is no place for academic theory' in teacher education programmes, but for such theory to have practical impact it must come to be 'owned' by the teacher as part of her 'intuitive' knowledge base (Lampert, 1984).

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¹ This study was the subject of an M.A. Thesis. For a full account the reader is directed to Bell, (1991).

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For some of the teachers who participated in this study, the opportunity to engage with the observational data and to discuss these in the interview context prompted reflection. Some teachers realised they held misconceptions about what was happening in their programmes. All struggled to explain aspects of their practice. Sometimes a teacher's account was not congruent with her observed practice. Sometimes her account contained contradictory statements. Such contradictions were especially apparent in relation to teachers' accounts of play, which seemed to reflect both 'formal' knowledge of the kind found in text books, and 'intuitive knowledge' constructed from teachers' own personal observations and experiences. Notably it was those beliefs which fell in the category of intuitive or 'commonsense' knowledge that could be clearly seen to inform teachers' practice.

Jones (1980) claims that much of what is taught in courses of teacher education only ever achieves the status of 'formal knowledge' and for this reason is unlikely to impact upon practice. She urges teacher educators to invite teachers to explicate their own experience, arguing that

working teachers build theory out of their experience; they don't just quote others' theory. They don't act as they do because Piaget said so; they do it because they say so; because they have observed and experienced and they know that this is appropriate (Jones, 1980, p138).

But how appropriate? And how reliable are such observations and experiences? It is recognised that teaching is an inherently contradictory activity in which teachers are constantly required to pursue a multitude of potentially competing goals and meet a range of differing needs. However it is the contention of this paper that to do so unreflectively is not to do so effectively.

It is argued here that practice is most effective when teachers are able to make their beliefs explicit. This enables teachers to evaluate the 'fit' between their intentions and outcomes, to examine the utility of their beliefs in the light of practice and to revise either practice or theory accordingly. Oberg (1986) describes this process as one in which practice is transformed into praxis, that is, 'informed committed action'. For this transformation to occur a teacher must make conscious what is often largely unconscious. It means moving beyond habit to become a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983) who systematically observes what is happening and attempts to explain this in relation to educational goals. Such an explanation is referred to in this paper as a teacher's 'operational theory' (Hirst, 1983).

The study reported here asked the following two specific questions:

- What beliefs inform the practice of six New Zealand early childhood teachers, that is, what are their 'operational theories'?
- How adequate are these teachers' 'operational theories', that is, how do they rate as full and coherent accounts of practice?

METHOD

The chosen methodology enabled practice (defined as the daily work of teachers in the centre or kindergarten) to be explored from the viewpoints of the children, the teachers and the observer, ultimately yielding a negotiated account. Observation of four target children in each of two settings was followed by a series of interviews with teachers and children. The teacher interviews included both structured recall relating to specific recorded incidents as well as questions which sought teachers' views of their work more generally. This enabled teachers to draw on their case knowledge (Spodek and Rucinski, 1986) without constraining their reflection on practice.

While it was the beliefs and practices of six teachers that were the focus of the reported study, it was the activities of the target children as they engaged with these teachers which were recorded during the observation period. There were two reasons for attempting to gain the children's perspective on the practice of their teachers. In both centres children were allowed to select their own activities for most of each day. The work of Wood et al (1980) suggested that teachers' decisions not to engage with some children in this context are important signposts to their beliefs. The decision to observe and interview children as well as their teachers also reflected the view that the meanings of practices are socially constructed.

Settings

Observations were carried out in a childcare centre and a kindergarten, both near the city centre.

a) CHILDCARE CENTRE

The childcare centre is administered by a community trust and has 50 children attending at one time, 15 of whom are over 4 years and 10 of whom are under 2. (The under 2 year olds are housed in a separate part of the building.) There are in total nine full and part-time staff, five of whom work with the children over 2. They are all accommodated in a large house which has been partially modified and is made up of several rooms with a back door leading to a huge rectangular shaped play area.

b) KINDERGARTEN

The kindergarten is administered by the local Free Kindergarten Association and has a grade one classification, i.e., two groups of 40 children aged between 3 and 5 years attend for sessions of 2 and a half or 3 hours. There are two full-time staff. They are housed in a building designed for this purpose. It has one large room which can be divided by doors and a further smaller patio area through which children pass to reach the spacious L shaped play area.

Staff interviews were conducted in a setting of their choice. Five of the staff chose to be interviewed in their own homes and the sixth chose the centre. Child interviews were conducted in the centres.

Participants

a) CHILDREN

A letter seeking permission was sent to parents of all children aged between 4 years 3 months to 4 years 9 months and who attended the centres for 12 hours minimum per week. Two boys and two girls were chosen in each of the two settings, the first of each sex randomly and the second by selecting one from the remaining pool of children who had not been observed to play with the first child. In this way the likelihood of observing teacher interaction in a range of centre areas was increased. The children selected were aged between 4 years 3 months and 4 years 8 months. Eight children were each observed for a period of 10 hours at their early childhood centres.

b) TEACHERS

Six teachers were interviewed, two from the kindergarten and four from the childcare centre.

Procedures

The study was carried out between April and October 1988. The observations and interviews were conducted by the author, the observation and later coding completed with research assistance.

a) OBSERVATIONS

Each child was observed continuously for 20 x 30 minute periods, that is, 10 hours per child; a total of 80 hours. Where possible, the observations were carried out within a one week period, with attempts made to gather data which were representative of the child's total day in the centre. All children were observed at least twice from arrival and on departure. They were all observed throughout two of the daily staff-directed mat times and in some cases they were also observed throughout additional impromptu mat time sessions as well.

The child's language was recorded by a radio-microphone attached to a 'dress-up' jacket which was worn by the child.

The observer/s recorded:

1. All dialogue between the child and teachers and details of the context in which this occurred. (Running records)
2. Any incidents that seemed to offer insights into children's views of the staff, or the staff's view of their work with children. (Field notes)
3. Documents (for example, newsletters to parents, notices on walls) in which staff made public statements about their work. (Field notes)
4. Contextual data including the numbers of adults and children present, details of the daily programme and the weather conditions.

b) INTERVIEWS

i) Teachers

At the conclusion of the observational period, the six teachers were individually interviewed. The focus of the interview was on exploring the beliefs which informed teachers' practices, with dialogue about the target children allowing for exemplification. An interview schedule was used to structure the dialogue and included questions relating to centre function, teacher role, development and learning and educational goals as well as seeking teachers' perceptions of their own activity and that of the target children. The interviews included opportunities for staff to comment on transcribed accounts of actual observed interactive incidents in which they had participated. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were tape recorded.

ii) Children

Each of the children was also interviewed. These interviews took the form of informal conversations between the author and the child in the centre. An interview schedule was used which contained questions about the child's perception of the teacher and peer activities in the centre. The interviews lasted up to 10 minutes (according to the child's interest) and were tape recorded and later transcribed in full.

c) ANALYSIS OF DATA

i) Observational data

Records of all interactions between the target children and teachers were transcribed in full, yielding a total of 332 episodes. After careful reading and re-reading of these data, and several attempts at ordering these, mutually exclusive categories were developed to enable these episodes to be coded according to their purpose. In line with recent ethnographic work (Corsaro,

1986) it was decided to code whole episodes rather than break them down into 'moves' or conversational turns. The categories were developed after talking with these teachers about specific recorded incidents and reflect the ways in which they described the intent of their interactions. Their use arose as an attempt to systematise teachers' interactions with children in order to identify patterns, either individual or collective, which may have offered insights into practice.

The following categories were used: Social; Plays; Describes; Monitors; Affirms; Suggests; Assists; Extends; Leads; Mat; Directs; Seeks Recognition; Seeks Access; Seeks Arbitration.²

Teacher verification of these categories completed this process.

ii) Interview data

The interview data were transcribed in full and used to address the following questions:

What is the participant's view of the centre function and her own role in it?
What beliefs does she express about children's learning and development?
Descriptions of staff beliefs were then compared with the other data, e.g., staff-child interaction patterns, the child interviews and the field notes. Key words were searched (e.g., 'play', 'work') from the interactive data and their contexts examined. Finally individual case studies were prepared for each teacher.

d) FOLLOW UP INTERVIEWS

The first draft of the case studies were mailed to each participating staff member for confirmation, disconfirmation and/ or comment. Staff were contacted by phone and offered a further face to face meeting if they wished to discuss the interpretation of the data. Four staff preferred to submit written notes and two participated in a further interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While all of the teachers who participated in this study appeared to hold many views in common, there were some individual differences, more notably in what was done than what was said. The remainder of this paper will offer a synthesis of the 'operational theories' of these teachers, drawing on each of the six individual cases which are presented at length in the original study.

² For a full account of these categories and the coding process, see Bell (1991).

Finally, the adequacy of these teachers' theories will be briefly discussed and some recommendations given for teacher educators.

The teachers who participated in this study (and who have been given pseudonyms) were as follows:

Kim is the supervisor of the Childcare centre and holds the Karitane Diploma and the NZCA Certificate. She is aged 30+ and has had 10 years experience in childcare.

Fran is the assistant supervisor of the Childcare centre and holds the NZCA Certificate. She is aged 20+ and has had 5 years experience in childcare.

Maddy is a childcare teacher and holds a Trained Teachers Certificate (Primary). She is aged 20+ and has had two years experience in childcare.

Roxanne is a childcare teacher and is currently enrolled for the NZCA Certificate. She is aged 20+ and has had 2 years experience in childcare.

Mary is the Head teacher of the Kindergarten and holds both a Trained Teachers Certificate (Primary) and the NZFKU Diploma. She is aged 40+ and has had 12 years experience in the kindergarten service.

Amber is the teacher in the Kindergarten. She holds the NZFKU Diploma. She is aged 30+ and has had 7 years experience in the kindergarten service.

Teachers' Beliefs: A summary

The first research question asked: What beliefs inform the practice of six New Zealand early childhood teachers? A summary is given here drawing from the case studies.

a) FUNCTION OF THE CENTRES

Five of the teachers in this study described their centre as providing a childcare service to parents. Only Mary, the head teacher of the kindergarten, described her centre in purely educational terms. The four childcare teachers identified care (attending to children's physical and psychological well being) as the first priority of their centre programme, and education as a secondary focus. They differed in this from the kindergarten teachers who identified education as their only focus. This difference no doubt emerges from the structural differences between the two settings (for example the age of children enrolled, their length of time in the centre requiring the provision of meals and sleep facilities) as well as from the differing role perceptions held by staff in the two institutions.

A high proportion of the interactions of childcare staff were focused on routines (e.g. meals, tidying up). Further, their involvement in housekeeping tasks left little time for interactions with children who were already 'managing'. This may explain why in spite of a higher adult to child ratio in the childcare centre compared with the kindergarten, the kindergarten staff had approximately twice as many interactions with the target children than did the childcare staff.

b) EDUCATIONAL GOALS

While most of the teachers made reference to the 'all round development' of children as the overriding goal of their centre programme, it was the psycho-social domain that was consistently emphasised. Social skills, good relationships, positive self esteem, 'caring and sharing', confidence and respect were stressed as the most important outcomes of the programme, with teachers often drawing on their own life experiences to support these views.

Perhaps teachers believed that it was in this developmental domain that learning could not be left to chance. For many, their stated views that children must learn respect for others or 'social skills' were reflected in a lot of interactions of a directive nature related to centre routines, particularly tidying up. The two teachers who had received least early childhood training (Maddy and Roxanne) stressed the importance of transmitting social knowledge of 'right and wrong' to children and this was the focus of most of their interactions. The term 'development' did not adequately represent the way in which teachers actively socialised children to conform to prescribed social 'norms'. For example, Mary, who expressed the view that 'children developed at their own rate', was nonetheless relentless in insisting that children conform to centre expectations in relation to tidying up, with some 10% of her interactions involving specific directions to do so. In both centres mat time served as the context for explicit instruction in social behaviour, with children being instructed about turn taking and 'polite' ways of speaking, as well as participating in directed 'caring and sharing' with children being directed to hug their peers, or clap to affirm 'good' behaviour. While all of the teachers spoke of children's development and learning being largely beyond their influence, their actions suggested that they believed teachers have a responsibility to socialise children in line with social norms.

In the context of the interview only two teachers (Mary and Fran) made mention of children's intellectual development and it was they alone who engaged in interactions coded 'extends'. Both of these teachers expressed the belief that adults could and should promote children's intellectual development by approaching busy children and inviting them to extend upon what they are doing. Their beliefs were reflected in their

practice. The other teachers did not include intellectual development amongst their goals. The absence of such a focus seemed to reflect their beliefs about what is valuable (social-emotional development being identified by all teachers as the priority) and/or about children's development and learning. Some teachers explicitly expressed the view that children's learning could not be influenced by teachers, advocating adult non-intervention.

Learning 'school skills' (for example, name recognition, use of pencils) was a goal identified by all teachers, but accorded low priority both in the context of the interview and in practice. It emerged from a view of the school, frequently explicitly linked to teachers' personal recollections of schooling as an inflexible, curriculum (as opposed to child) -centred institution for which children needed preparation. While some centre practices (for example, colour recognition activities) were specifically related to school preparation, the practice of defining desired behavioural ends (for example, name recognition) was not congruent with teachers' other beliefs, notably those about what was important knowledge and how children's development and learning occurred. These practices were better explained as reflecting teachers' beliefs about the expectations of parents, schools, Ministry officers and teacher educators and the desire of the childcare teachers to improve their own perceived status. Both Kim, the childcare centre supervisor, and Maddy made this explicit in their reflections upon the practice of themes, commenting that while the staff knew that the theme content was often already known by the children they were heartened by the parents' enthusiasm for this practice. Kim described the records of the theme based programme as "something we have to put down" to meet Education Department expectations.

c) DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

The terms 'develop' and 'learn' were used interchangeably by teachers but the contexts in which these terms occurred suggest development was viewed as an outcome of learning which occurred through the interaction of children's experience and their physiological 'readiness'. All teachers described children as learning through interaction with the environment (specifically, the centre activities). These beliefs were evident in the 'free play' programmes which operated in each centre and are consistent with an interactionist perspective of development. Smith and Shepard (1988) define this as one point on a continuum of beliefs about development, with 'interactionism' falling in the centre and characterised by the view that development is amenable to environmental intervention while 'nativism' falls to one end and implies the belief that development is an internal organismic process. While all of these teachers believed that the environment did influence development, views differed on what might be influential, which aspects of development were amenable to influence and what amount of impact

different influences might exert. Those teachers who spoke of learning through play (e.g. Kim, Maddy) also expressed the view that children should be left to get on with this by themselves. Some teachers (in particular, Amber) attributed more weight to physiological factors than did others, her view that 'if they're not ready there's nothing much you can do' suggesting that her view of development falls towards the nativist end of the continuum (Smith and Shepard, 1988). In general most of these teachers did leave children to 'get on with it', intervening only to teach socially appropriate behaviour. Mary and Fran differed in that they actively initiated conversation with children with the intention of promoting intellectual development. Amber who had the highest number of interactions, alongside a declared non-interventionist philosophy, presented an enigma. This was partially explainable in the light of her view that the development of children's self esteem depended on approval from adults. Amber's inability to explain the discrepancy between her declared beliefs and actions raises questions about the adequacy of her theory.

All teachers spoke of the importance of peers as models and believed children learned by observing others. For this reason they encouraged children to play with others, although they were resigned to the fact that some children (e.g. Nell, a socially isolated child) would not be accepted by their peers. Direct instruction was also viewed as a way of influencing children's learning, with teachers holding different views about its appropriateness. Nevertheless, all teachers with the exception of Fran, did engage in significant amounts of direct instruction in relation to centre routines.

d) TEACHER ROLE

Apart from Mary and Fran, all teachers espoused a non-interventionist view of their teaching role. While the former teachers expressed commitment to actively seeking out busy children and affirming or inviting extension of their activity, the others spoke of engaging with children only if there was a 'problem' (for example, aggressive play). Qualifying this latter view was the belief that one's influence would be in any case limited. Teachers spoke positively of accepting individual differences. These were explained by reference to two constructs 'readiness' and 'home effects'. King (1978) reported the same constructs as being used by British infant teachers whose 'child centred ideology' matched that of the teachers in the present study.

Teachers' role perceptions were generally consistent with their behaviours. This is not surprising in view of the literature which reports role perceptions to be influential (e.g. Ferri, Birchell, Gingell & Gipps, 1981). Several teachers attempted to define the term 'teacher' in a way that reflected their perception of this role as non-directive (e.g. Mary as an 'interactor', Fran as a 'friend'). The interactions of these teachers were consistent

with their descriptions. However all teachers did engage in directive interactions related to non-negotiable aspects of centre practice (such as mat time attendance and tidying up). Several teachers (e.g. Kim, Mary) were surprised and disconcerted by the number of their interactions which had a directive focus, suggesting a gap between their intentions and actual practice. Teachers' explanations of practice stressed children's choice and they seemed genuinely puzzled by questions about what children had to do, reiterating that children chose their activities. Yet the children perceived their teachers as people who interrupted their activity with redirections, for example, Betsy commented "They're always getting in our way!" after a teacher's request to tidy up the family corner (Field notes: 12/8/88).

While teachers gave such directions constantly, none felt they would be justified in trying to change children's activity choice patterns. In spite of their statements about the importance of children's 'all round development', they were clearly resistant to attempting such changes. In line with the non-interventionist philosophy, the distribution of teacher attention or stereotypical activity patterns were not viewed as problematic. Teachers tended to see children's interactions with staff as largely determined by the children (although staff initiated 2:1) and generally expressed the view that children must be trusted to make their own choices. While most teachers said they would 'suggest' that a child try a new activity, their intervention was seen as stopping there. While Mary actually implemented a behaviour modification programme to change sex-stereotyped play patterns, this was initiated in response to a course requirement and conflicted with her belief that children should select activities only when they are 'ready'.

Behaviour modification programmes were implemented in both centres. In the childcare centre Kim gave out stars and stamps for tidying up. Because of the nature of this behaviour (conforming to social rules) she felt this intervention was acceptable. However all teachers expressed the view that definition of desired ends in relation to other aspects of children's learning was illegitimate and in conflict with such constructs as 'readiness' and 'freedom to choose'. This meant, to use the smorgasbord analogy, that while some children enjoyed a wide and balanced 'diet', others tasted just a little of what was available. Their teachers, by and large, saw this as inevitable, explaining it by reference to the child or his/her home rather than to centre practice. Teachers seemed to see themselves as relatively powerless to change behaviour learned in the home or to influence the amount of 'potential' a child might have for learning.

As in King's (1978) study, the teachers in this study subscribed in varying degrees to the view that children's 'readiness' was a prerequisite for learning and that such readiness would be identified by the child's demonstrated interest. Yet in the process of observing the daily activities of the target children it became clear that a 'peer culture' existed in which children exerted pressure on others to conform with socially prescribed norms. Children were particularly outspoken in relation to what they considered to be gender appropriate activity, their comments serving to maintain stereotyped behaviour patterns. Davies (1989) reports a similar finding from her study of preschool discourse and refers to this phenomenon as 'boundary maintenance' (Davies, 1989, p41). These findings offer a challenge to teachers' beliefs that the children in an early childhood centre are 'free' to choose the activity which will best further their learning. It is also a questionable assumption that a teacher will, in fact, notice a child's demonstration of interest. Several of the target children, notably those described as 'reserved' and 'withdrawn' by staff, engaged in almost no interaction with teachers at all, except in the context of a large group in which they remained relatively anonymous.

When teachers do interact with children their beliefs about their role appear to be crucial. In this study only three of two teachers who mentioned children's thinking were observed to engage in extending conversation. The others who stressed 'social development' were actively engaged in socialising children to conform with centre rules. The following incident provides an example of this.

For several days Liam and the two friends he played with had been regularly gathering at the side of the fish tank and pointing at the 'rainbow' (created by the refraction of sunlight through the glass). They questioned each other as to how it had gotten there but no answers were forthcoming. On two occasions a teacher approached this knot of puzzling children and asked them if they had tidied up. Their interest in the rainbow was never communicated to the staff although it was quite overt to an observer. (Field notes: 19/6/88)

Most of these teachers focused on giving instruction about social norms. Despite a large literature which promotes the role adults can play in children's learning, these teachers seemed to believe that children's intellectual development would take care of itself through play. At the same time, however they they also expressed reservations about the quality of children's play, describing it as limited and repetitive. This view matched the observer's perception and, indeed, that of the children who on several occasions were recorded to comment on their play as 'boring' and the centre day as 'too long' (Field notes: 25/5/88; 27/7/88). Perhaps, these teachers simply felt uncertain about how to involve themselves. Certainly, this was the view expressed by Mary, whose attempts to 'get children thinking' were by no means well received by

them. Teachers eventually dismissed the less responsive children (e.g. Nell, Paul, Mark) as 'developing in their own way', this phrase perhaps disguising their sense of helplessness.

e) **PLAY: FORMAL AND INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE**

In five of the case studies, i.e. those teachers who had been formally trained in early childhood education, an apparent discrepancy existed between what teachers said about play and their actual practice. When asked to 'describe play' teachers would explain that it was 'everything a child does'. This statement was often supplemented by the further statements, 'play is the child's work' and 'children learn through their play'. This is the traditional view enshrined in the literature on children's play (e. g., Parten, 1932) and provides support for the play-based programmes offered in both centres. When play is understood to be everything a child does, developmentally appropriate, ('play is the child's work') and the context for learning ('children learn through their play') then whatever a child does at the centre has to be valuable. Yet while teachers made statements of this kind, they also qualified them by assessing some activities as more worthwhile than others. Further, in their observed practice they frequently interrupted children at child initiated activities and directed them to others (e.g. tidying up).

In practice these teachers used the term 'play' quite selectively, in relation to certain specific activities only. Not only was this the case in the transcripts of teachers' interactions, but it was also evident in the way they spoke indirectly about play during the interviews. In each teacher's interview there were contradictory statements made about play. A different account of play was given according to whether the questions were of an abstract nature (e.g. 'what is play?') or embedded in the context of practice (e.g. 'what is Rose doing in this incident?'). When discussing their practice teachers spoke of play in the same way as they did in practice, as revealed by the transcripts. In the context of practice or reflection on practice 'play' meant either physical or 'pretend' activity. It had the further connotations of being child-directed and sociable. Not surprisingly, given the social context, all of the children shared this understanding, describing these same specific activities as 'play' and all other activities as 'not play'. Given these terms, in spite of teachers' espoused commitment to play, rarely if ever were they observed either to play themselves or to interact with playing children. In the 'real world' of the centres, play was understood to be something children did by themselves and which complemented those other activities which received teacher input. It could be argued from these data that the teachers, in spite of some statements to the contrary, saw play as having limited value.

How might the contradictory accounts of play be explained? It is argued here that these teachers drew on two different kinds of knowledge in their accounts of play: 'formal' and 'intuitive' (Lampert, 1984). In making the distinction Lampert says of intuitive knowledge that

each individual builds a store of this commonsense sort of information from personal experimentation on the physical environment. Such knowledge is not usually made explicit but is often useful and powerful. It contrasts, therefore, with the formal knowledge one is taught in school: a commonly accepted set of well-articulated descriptions of experience which may have little connection with the knowledge individuals apply in their everyday lives (Lampert, 1984, p2).

Lampert's distinction is similar to that made by Jones (1981) who draws on the Piagetian terminology, 'logical' and 'social' (Kamii & De Vries, 1977) in a discussion of teacher education models. She offers the following definition of these Piagetian constructs:

logical knowledge is constructed by the learner who generalises from repeated experiences (whereas) social knowledge is the conventions of one's culture, the names of things and rules for behaviour. Because these things are arbitrary they can only be taught directly, by telling or showing (Jones, 1981, p127).

She suggests that much of the formal theory taught to beginning teachers only ever becomes 'social knowledge', that is it is learned by rote but never integrated with one's world view to become 'logical' knowledge. In a sense, it is knowledge only of someone else's belief rather than a belief one 'owns' (that is, justifies from one's own personal experience). This is not to say that teachers who express 'formal' knowledge disbelieve what they say. Rather such assertions relate to social conventions rather than personal experience, and therefore have a different status.

Attention to the language process of the interviews offers support for this interpretation. Statements which linked play to personal experience were offered confidently and quickly, while statements of formal knowledge were expressed much more tentatively, often in 'text book' phrases and without further elaboration. Further support comes from the observation that teachers who expressed the formal account of 'play as the child's work' were unlikely to draw on this to explain or justify practice. Roxanne, for example could not explain why there was a play programme operating in the centre. None of the childcare teachers attempted to influence parents' negative perceptions of the programme as 'just play'; rather they promoted themes as a way of impressing parents. 'Play as the child's work' and 'play as learning' was part of the formal knowledge which had shaped the rules requiring centres to provide play programmes,

but it was not integrated with teachers' intuitive understandings of play, understandings which were shared by the children in the centre.

While the programme structure emerged from the formal view of play as 'everything children do', teachers' actual interaction patterns were consistent with their intuitive views of play as an activity which children engaged in collectively and which centred around either vigorous movement or pretence. Notably, all teachers believed that teachers should stay out of children's play and were observed to do just that, other than to re-direct or, as in the case of Fran, where a child was perceived to need support in a play context. Teachers were much more likely to engage with children who were 'working' (e.g. tidying up) or 'making' with the intention of evaluating and extending their activity.

Do early childhood teachers really value children's play as a medium for learning or is the description of 'play as learning' simply formal rhetoric? Several teachers explicitly expressed reservations about the value of play. Teachers' actions would certainly seem to convey to children that it is activities other than play that have importance to adults. While there is some distance between this interpretation and the analysis of Apple and King (1977) it is not difficult to see such behaviour as early socialisation for the experience of formal schooling, in which work and play are separated (Renwick, 1984). The comments made by these teachers about not 'intervening' or 'interrupting' children's play suggests they would offer a different explanation for their absence from children's play contexts. Their statements that children need to 'play out' their experiences without adult intervention and that children learn more from peer models than from adults are consistent with psychodynamic and social learning theories. However Smith and Shepard's (1988) study alerts us to the ways in which structural features influence belief and provides a warning against accepting one-directional accounts unquestioningly. It may be that when teacher attention is a scarce resource (e.g. when the teacher-child ratio is unfavourable) certain 'beliefs' have a particular attraction, allowing teachers to reconcile what is possible with what is desirable. Each of these alternatives warrants further investigation if teacher behaviour in relation to children's play is to be satisfactorily explained.

Teachers' 'Operational Theories': A summary

The reported study was concerned with assessing the adequacy of the operational theories held by the six teachers who participated. By relating the accounts these teachers give of their beliefs to what they do in practice, several observations made:

1. All teachers in the study were able to offer some account of their beliefs, although their abilities to do so differed markedly. In the main, what teachers said was consistent with what they did. In particular, what teachers said they valued (e.g., teaching respect) was usually found to be the focus of much of their interaction.
2. In each teacher's account some statements of belief were explicitly linked to the teachers' life experiences beyond the centre context. These beliefs seemed highly influential in the practice of teachers, suggesting that they were both genuine and powerful. For example, Fran believed that you had to 'know you were OK' to cope with adult life and her practice was focused on affirming children's activity, while Roxanne believed you had to 'learn the rules' if you were to cope with school and set out to teach these at every opportunity. It is claimed here that such beliefs, emerging from teachers' reflections on personal experiences, form part of teachers' intuitive knowledge and as such have a different status from their statements of formal knowledge.
3. Some accounts had less to do with teachers' educational beliefs and more to do with their perceptions of contextual features such as the status of childcare work, the availability of trained staff, and the expectations of people in authority. In this study, these perceptions are viewed as another kind of belief which informs practice (while in other reported studies they are described as 'constraints'). It is possible that beliefs of this nature may be masked by apparent educational 'beliefs'. For example, while initially teachers described mat time as 'promoting children's learning', when questioned further they indicated their skepticism about this claim but justified the practice by commenting that it generated parent approval.
4. Sometimes teachers' statements of belief were not consistent with their observed practice. Several possible explanations seem likely:
 - a) The statement is not one of genuine belief but rather reflects the teacher's view of what the questioner wants to hear. (It is noted here that assessing the 'genuineness' of someone's belief is problematic.) In the context of this study, statements of belief which were not manifest in a person's practice were not seen to be part of a person's theory.
 - b) The statement of belief is an assertion of a 'proposition' which the teacher entertains. It is a statement of someone else's belief, perhaps existing as formal theory, which the teacher accepts at the propositional level. Statements of this kind often emerge as slogans, e.g. 'play is the child's work'. The teacher does not disbelieve these statements, and to that extent

at least we might say she believes them. Actually they exist as untested 'propositions'. Often such statements relate to aspects of practice over which teachers see themselves having little control, e.g. the structure of the programme. It has been argued that these often reflect a person's formal rather than intuitive knowledge. To the extent that they inform practice, they constitute part of a teacher's theory.

- c) The statement of belief is genuine but this belief is overridden or modified by another stronger belief. Thus Fran, in spite of believing that adults should not become involved in children's play, did become involved with Nell in order to provide the affirmation that she felt Nell needed. When teachers recognised their conflicting beliefs they reported experiencing 'dilemmas' in relation to their practice (e.g. Mary acknowledged her conflict between wanting to 'teach' as well as wanting to 'let children develop'). It is of interest to note that Mary, the teacher who gave the fullest account of her operational theory was still wrestling with its contradictory aspects. Her attempts to reconcile these involved her in testing various ideas out in practice and reflecting on the outcomes. There was a sense in which this process would never be finished, but was part of her ongoing praxis.

Often, however, teachers were unaware of contradictions between their statements or between what they said and did. For example, Roxanne was observed to act both as authority figure and conspirator, while Amber claimed that she aimed to promote children's independence, yet was observed to maintain their dependency by continually initiating interactions focused on assisting children (who were capable of independence). It seems likely that in these cases the teachers' declared beliefs were not genuine, or that these had only the status of 'propositions' which were entertained. Or, in the case of Amber it may have been that her beliefs were genuine but her theory didn't 'work'; that is, while she genuinely believed that her interactions promoted independence, the empirical evidence proved this to be a false belief.

5. Some teachers were unable to explain why they acted as they did. This may have reflected the limits of the methods used to elicit their views. However in some cases it seemed also to mean that their practice was relatively untheorised. Many teachers in this study indicated that the interview process prompted reflection for the first time. Some teachers, however (e.g. Amber, Roxanne) saw no need for reflection and were happy to allow practice to remain unexplained. This appeared linked to their view of practice as largely outside their control, but rather part of a structure determined by someone else (e.g., 'The Department of Education'; 'The schools').

CONCLUSION

It was claimed at the beginning of this paper that teachers will only be optimally effective in achieving their educational goals when they are able to offer full and coherent accounts of their work and the theory which underpins it.

In light of this claim, the following suggestions are made regarding teacher education.

1. Practical problems should provide the starting place for dialogue between teacher educators and teachers. This may be effected through the juxtapositioning of teaching practice with classroom discussion, allowing teachers to identify real dilemmas, explore these collectively, and return to test theory, seeking resolution in practice.
2. The nature of the practical problems identified by teachers is likely to change as they gain more experience. This suggests that planned opportunities for teacher education should be career long.
3. Teacher educators should engage with teachers' existing beliefs. This would require shared reflection in an atmosphere of trust in which teachers are assisted to make these beliefs explicit, identify contradictions and ultimately submit belief to practical tests.
4. Formal or academic theories should be presented to teachers as resources available to assist them in the resolution of practical problems. The focus should be on developing 'operational theories' which inform their practices. In this way theory becomes demystified and all knowledge becomes problematic, the subject of critical self-reflection.
5. Beginning teachers' understandings of formal theory should not be assumed on the basis of their responses, removed from the practical context. Formal knowledge may come to have the status only of discourse, rather than actually informing practice. Assessment will need to involve observation of practice as well as beginning teachers' accounts of their practice.
6. Time should be set aside in teacher education programmes to allow for teachers' critical self-reflection, observation, processing and testing of theory.
7. The possibility that a hidden curriculum operates within teacher education programmes should be investigated, to ensure that teachers come to view teacher as a form of praxis rather than merely 'following rules'. Such investigation would require teacher educators to transform their own practice into praxis.

At this time, when the discourse of accountability prevails, it is necessary for teachers to be not only effective educators but also articulate advocates for their work with young children and their families.

Teacher educators best support this process by becoming partners with teachers in dialogue which serves to inform and transform practice.

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